

## INTRODUCTION

This is the seventh and final message in the series of "Ruth: The Romance of Redemption." The title of this message is "God's Invisible Hand at Work." Like all good love stories, our hero, Boaz marries Ruth, and they're blessed with a son. When a baby comes into your family by birth or adoption, it is a blessed event. Three expectant fathers were sitting in the waiting room on the maternity floor of a hospital. The nurse came out and said to one of them, "Congratulations, your wife had twins!" He said, "That's interesting, because I play baseball for the Minnesota Twins!" A little while later the nurse came out and said to another man, "Congratulations, your wife had triplets." The man said, "That's interesting because I work for 3M." At that moment, the third guy jumped up and ran out of the waiting room screaming. The two other dads chased him and when they caught him they said, "What's wrong with you?" He said, "I work for 7Up!" Well, whether you have one child or seven, they are a blessing! And today, we're going to learn that one grandchild is better than seven sons!

For each message, I've shared a synopsis of the full story so you can appreciate the plot. Some of you have heard the plot six times, so I wrote it a little differently. I call this the story of Ruth in the key of F.

Facing a famine, a fearful family failed to find food, so they said farewell to their friends. Elimelech forfeited his fortune and fields to flee to a foreign land. His family, including Naomi, followed forth. They found a flawed foreign culture where their faith wasn't feasible. The two feeble sons married foreign females, which was forbidden. There were three frightful fatalities of the men, and after a few funerals, Naomi and Ruth, two forlorn females, fled back to Bethlehem.

The females had to fend for themselves and were famished. They faced a frugal future, so Ruth found food by following a few folks into the fields. Fortunately, she also found favor in the field of Boaz, a fabulous farmer. It was no fluke that he was fond of her and more than fair; so he fed her full with free food.

Naomi figured that Boaz was fated to be a family kinsman, and could free up the family's forfeited fields with his finances. She framed a plan to get the fresh-fragranced Ruth in front of him. During a festival Ruth followed the flow of farmers to find Boaz. Following the feasting Ruth finally found him asleep on the threshing floor.

He woke up a bit fazed to find a female at his feet. She focused on the farmer and finally found the fortitude to frame the fateful question, "I have feelings for you; will you favor me as my fiancé?" He fired back his fervent reply, "Fantastic!" But then he frowned with frustration and said "Another fellow has first family foreclosure rights. But don't fear, I'll fix it." The other fellow didn't fight. He favored the fields, but not the female, so he forfeited the farm with no fuss. Finally the fair Ruth and faithful Boaz formed a fine family. God favored them with a son who was fated to fulfill God's future in the fullness of time as foretold by a few prophets. This isn't a fictitious fable about the fickle finger of fate. It is a factual story of our Father's Faithful favor toward us. He frees us from a frightful future by fixing our failures and flaws forever through His forgiveness.

That's the full story, now let's read the fantastic finish found in Ruth 4:13-22:

“So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. Then he went to her, and the Lord enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son. The women said to Naomi: ‘Praise be to the Lord, who this day has not left you without a kinsman-redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel! He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age. For your daughter-in-law, who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons, has given him birth.’ Then Naomi took the child, laid him in her lap and cared for him. The women living there said, ‘Naomi has a son.’ And they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David. This, then, is the family line of Perez: Perez was the father of Hezron, Hezron the father of Ram, Ram the father of Amminadab, Amminadab the father of Nahshon, Nahshon the father of Salmon, Salmon the father of Boaz, Boaz the father of Obed, Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David.”

There are basically two ways God works in the world. First, He works through miracles. When a miracle happens you KNOW the hand of God is involved. But the second way God works is through His Providence. And this is when you can't see His hand, it's invisible, but God is still at work. It's like Clint Eastwood. Sometimes he's an actor and you see him on the screen and sometimes he's a director and you don't see him. When God performs a miracle, He's front and center, but when He works through Providence, He's in the background.

To understand the Providence of God, let's take the word apart. Pro- means “over” and -vidence is the root word “to watch.” You know what a video is, something you watch. The Providence of God means that He watches over the affairs of our lives. But He is not a casual spectator; He is active in this world and in our lives. To put it another way, God is sovereign. That means He rules over history. History is His story! There's a great chorus we sing sometimes that says, “Our God reigns.” A church was going to sing that song, and the title was misspelled in the bulletin. It said, “Our God Resigns” instead of “Our God Reigns.” You can be certain God hasn't resigned! He is in control.

There aren't any outright miracles in the story of Ruth, but it is filled with evidence of the Divine fingerprints of God's invisible hand at work. In the same way, God is working in your life. Sometimes what we think are simply random events are actually the invisible hand of God working to guide us toward His goal for us—to make us more like Jesus.

Let's notice how God was working in the lives of Naomi, Ruth, and little Obed. We'll also learn how God is working in our lives.

## **1. THE NAOMI LESSON: GOD STILL CARES FOR US EVEN WHEN WE'RE BITTER TOWARD HIM**

Some scholars have said the name of this book should be Naomi rather than Ruth. And here in final verses, our attention is redirected to Naomi as she holds her grandson. Her name means “pleasant” but when she and Ruth returned to Bethlehem she was full of bitterness. She said, “Don't call me Naomi,” she told them. “Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full but the Lord has brought me back empty.” (Ruth 1:20-21)

Remember, Naomi represents a backslidden Christian who wanders away from God and then returns. Actually, it was the disobedience of Elimelech to leave God's land and God's people that produced this bitterness. But she didn't say that; she directed all the blame toward God. But here at the end of the story, she has changed her name again. Now she could say, "Don't call me 'bitter,' call me 'grandmother!'"

As she looked back she could see that the long, twisted road of her life actually brought her to a good place. Rascal Flatts has a song along those lines. It says, "God blessed the broken road that led me straight to you." That's the Providence of God at work. When a miracle happens you recognize it immediately, but you only recognize the providence of God in your life as you look backwards.

Even though she blamed God for her misery and bitterness, He never stopped loving her and in the end, He blessed her more than she could have imagined. We do the same thing. When our lives are miserable, we want to shake our fists at God and complain, "Why have you made my life so bitter? It's all YOUR fault!"

Come on, be honest. Have you ever said that to God? You say, "No, but I've thought it a time or two." Well, God reads your thoughts, too! But that's okay, God can take it. Even when you are bitter, He still loves you and cares for you. He still has great plans for you. You may be where Naomi was in chapter 1. Your blessing gauge is on empty, and your bitterness gauge is on full. What can you do? Trust Him.

### **Action Plan: To extend your life, start investing yourself in future generations**

Naomi found happiness in caring for her little grandson, Obed. The women said, "He [Obed] will renew your life and sustain you in your old age." (Ruth 4:15) We often use the expression, "getting a new lease on life." That's exactly what happened to Naomi as she found a new purpose in life in caring for her grandson. It's obvious from these verses that Naomi did more than just hold Obed; she became the baby's nurse. She was Obed's full-time sitter.

She had a second chance at parenting. We don't know what kind of mother she was to her two sons, but they had lived in a foreign culture and married women from Moab. But now she had more age and wisdom and she knew better how to train up a child in the way he should go.

I'm sure she told him about how she and her family left Bethlehem and traveled to Moab where she first met his mother, Ruth. I'm sure she told little Obed the story of his other grandmother, Rahab, and how she helped the spies at Jericho. Obed grew up knowing he was a special gift from God.

How many grandparents are here today? I have four grandchildren and I have come to appreciate the saying, "They're called 'grandchildren' because they are grand when they arrive and grand when they leave." I've heard all the other sayings like, "Grandkids are God's reward for not killing your children." Or "If I had known having grandkids was so much fun, I would have had them first." When you're a young parent sometimes you just stay in survival mode. But

grandparents often have the time and wisdom to invest in the lives of their grandkids.

When I was in Gardendale, Alabama preaching at my former church last month, I played golf with a few of my old friends. As we were eating good old Alabama pork barbecue after golf, he said, "So what are your goals for the next ten years?" I really hadn't thought about that too much and it made me stop with my mouth full. As I chewed and swallowed, it gave me a chance to think. I said, "I want to keep on pastoring the greatest church in America, and I really want to concentrate on pouring my life into my grandchildren." I have a great desire to do what Naomi did for Obed.

I've watched some of you who have poured your lives into your grandchildren and I admire you for doing that. I want to challenge all the grandparents here to join me in making a difference in the lives of our grandchildren. If you aren't a parent or grandparent, you can still make a difference in the life of a child. Volunteer to work in our Preschool or Children's Ministry. Or volunteer for the Boys and Girls Club. The best way for you to feel younger and have more energy is by pouring your life into a younger person.

## **2. THE RUTH LESSON: ALL THE RESOURCES OF OUR REDEEMER ARE AVAILABLE TO US!**

Ruth is a picture of a new Christian. She was a stranger from a foreign land and became part of the Family of God. We're all strangers and foreigners to God until we accept His grace and trust Him to be our kinsman-redeemer. When she married Boaz she received all that Boaz owned. Everything he had was available to her.

Can you imagine one morning Ruth is leaving the house and Boaz says, "Where are you going, sweetheart?" Ruth says, "Oh, I'm going out into the field to glean a few handfuls of grain so I can prepare some bread for us." Can't you hear Boaz saying, "What are you doing? Don't you know that I own the field? I have barns full of grain, and all that is yours. You don't have to beg any more. I am yours and you are mine and I have all you'll ever need!"

When you became part of God's family, everything you need is available to you. But the sad thing is that too many Christians are living like spiritual beggars instead of claiming what is already theirs in Christ.

I love this promise from God's Word, "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" (Romans 8:32)

Notice those last two words. It doesn't say "some things" or "most things." It says ALL things! Every resource of our heavenly husband, Jesus, is available to us because of our love relationship with Him.

**Action Plan: Instead of begging God for blessings, start claiming them and sharing them!**

Boaz would have been insulted if Ruth had returned to the fields as a beggar. But it seems that ignorant Christians often take the role of a beggar when it comes to prayer.

Ray Stedman wrote: "I imagine that the Lord Jesus looks at us sometimes in amazement and says, 'What are you doing? Why do you keep coming to me and asking for the thing that you already have? Why do you ask for strength and grace and joy and peace? I have given you all this. All that I am is all that you need. Why keep begging for that which you already have?' If we would begin to walk out upon this mighty transforming truth that God has given us here in the book of Ruth—that we are now married to him who is risen from the dead, married to the man of strength and of wealth, who has given to us all that he is and all that he has, our lives would be transformed."

The Bible says, "And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work... You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion." (2 Corinthians 9:8, 11)

The reason God grants us all the blessings we need is because He wants us to share those blessings with others. He wants us to be generous in every occasion. We are blessed to be a blessing. We aren't beggars, we're blessers!

I read about a true story that happened to a couple that had just gotten married. They were getting ready to fly out the next day for their honeymoon, so they arrived late at a hotel near the airport to spend one night. When they entered the room, they were disappointed because there wasn't even a bed, there was only a sleeper sofa with a thin mattress, and the bathroom was tiny. They were both tired, so they didn't call the front desk to complain, they just looked around until they found the sheets. They unfolded the bed and put the sheets on. The mattress wasn't very comfortable, but they made it through the night.

As they were checking out the next morning, the husband decided to complain about how small the room was. The desk clerk asked, "Did you open the door into the rest of the suite?" The husband said, "I saw a door, but I thought it went to a closet." The desk clerk said, "We booked you in the honeymoon suite. Behind that door was a king-sized bed and a bathroom with a Jacuzzi tub. There were complimentary drinks and snacks in there as well." That bride and groom felt pretty foolish knowing they had missed everything that had been available to them. All they had to do was walk through the door to enjoy it. I wonder how many Christians will enter heaven and feel foolish to learn how much of God's power and blessing were really available to them – they just never claimed it. The Bible says, "You have not because you ask not." (James 4:2)

### **3. THE OBED LESSON: GOD IS ALWAYS WORKING TO ACCOMPLISH HIS PLAN**

And God's plan is to redeem, to rescue a fallen creation. He does it any way He wants, but sometimes He does it by bringing a baby into the world. Obed was born in Bethlehem and he would be the grandfather of King David. When we come to the genealogy of Obed, we begin to see God's invisible hand at work. Why did Naomi and Ruth return to Bethlehem? Because God knew that in the future, a descendent of Ruth would be born in Bethlehem. This name would be called Jesus. The lineage of Jesus runs through David, so 1,300 years later when Caesar Augustus in Rome "just happened" to levy a tax on the entire Roman Empire, everyone had to

return to their family home. Joseph and Mary were descendants of David so they “just happened” to be required to visit Bethlehem. And it “just happened” that Mary was pregnant at the time and the Messiah was born in Bethlehem.

And in our story, Ruth “just happened” to be gleaning in the field of Boaz, who “just happened” to be a kinsman redeemer. These weren't random coincidences; they represent the Providence of God—His invisible hand at work. As you look back on life, you can see the hand of God at work, but the problem is that we have to live life forwards, not backwards. But God always sees the end from the beginning.

A few months ago, I watched an episode of Seinfeld which started at the end of the story and went completely backwards. It started with a messy breakup and even had a scene that was a wedding in India. As I was watching it, I was so totally confused that I pushed record on my DVR so I could go back and watch it again to figure it out. But only when I got to the end, did the beginning make sense because the end was really the beginning. Does that make sense to you? Of course it doesn't. When we read a book or watch a movie, we want to start and the beginning and move to the ending. But when it comes to the history and future of the universe, God doesn't need to look at it that way. In fact the Bible says, “I am God, and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please...what I have said, that will I bring about; what I have planned, that will I do.” (Isaiah 46:9-11)

How many times in life have we looked around seen things happen that we can't explain? We wonder what in the world God is doing because it sure doesn't make any sense to us. Jack Taylor used to say the problem isn't with God; it's with us. We don't have enough sense for God's sense to make sense. But God is in control.

We may not know what in the world is going on, but God does, so we should learn to trust Him. There's an old saying, “God is too wise to be mistaken; He is too good to be unkind; So when you don't understand; When you don't see His plan; When you can't trace His hand; Trust His heart.”

### **Action Plan: Look around and see where God is working and join Him!**

God was in the process of redeeming Ruth, and He graciously allowed Boaz to join him in that work of redemption. The key verse of Ruth is found in 2:12 where Boaz says Ruth came to Israel to find shelter under the “wings of God.” Then Boaz became the one to give her that shelter and security. God wants to use you to help someone else find salvation and redemption. He is in the process of redeeming people of every race and culture on the planet. He may not be doing it the way we think He should, but that's not our call. Our job is to join Him in His work. Jesus said, “My Father is always at his work to this very day...the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does.” (John 5:17-19) Look around you. God is changing lives right here. Look around you as you head out to work or school tomorrow. God is rescuing people and He wants to graciously use you and me to be his instrument to bring about their redemption.

## CONCLUSION

Some people say, "The Bible says, 'God moves in mysterious ways.'" No, that's NOT in the Bible, but to us, it does seem that God's ways are mysterious to us. William Cowper was a poet who lived in London during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. He struggled with bipolar disorder, although it didn't have a name back then. He even spent time in an insane asylum. He wanted to marry his cousin, but her father refused, so he slipped deeper into despair. Twice at age of 32, he became so depressed and disgusted with living that he tried to kill himself. He once overdosed on a narcotic medicine, but he survived. One dark night he hired a horse-drawn cabbie to drive him to a bridge over the Thames River, intending to jump off. As they left a thick fog descended on London and the cabbie drove around for an hour and never found the bridge. Frustrated, William got out of the carriage and decided to walk to the bridge. He found to his surprise that they had driven in a circle and he was back at his own doorstep! William decided that night God had a hand in the fog, so his entire perspective changed and he never attempted suicide again.

Although he continued to struggle with depression he later looked back on that foggy night and wrote a poem he entitled, "Light Shining out of Darkness." When these words were put to music the hymn became known as "God Moves in a Mysterious Way." "God moves in a mysterious way; His wonders to perform; He plants His footsteps in the sea; And rides upon the storm. You fearful saints, fresh courage take; The clouds you so much dread; Are big with mercy and shall break; In blessings on your head. Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, But trust Him for His grace; Behind a frowning providence; He hides a smiling face!"

For years, Cowper feared God was angry with him. He was afraid God would send him to hell because of his sickness and failures. But by this time he had come to realize those ominous storm clouds were actually full of mercy. He saw that what he thought was the frowning face of an angry God, was actually a loving God who was smiling at him.

God loves you and has a plan for your life. It is a plan to help you, not to harm you. He wants to give you a hope and a future. He is smiling at you.

The story of Ruth has a happy ending. It started with nomads and ended with people at home. It started with funerals and ended with a wedding. It started with death and ended with the birth of a baby. It started with poverty and ended with contentment. It started out with bitterness and ended up with the sweet taste of God's provision. As someone redeemed by our kinsman, Jesus, we are assured that our lives will also have a happy ending.

I love the story of little boy who was choosing a puppy. He was looking into a cage of squirming puppies in a pet store. There was one little pup that was wagging its tail furiously. The little boy turned to his mommy and said, "I want the one with the happy ending!" And when you choose Jesus you have chosen the life with the happy ending ... or to be more truthful, it will never end!

## OUTLINE

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"Don't call me Naomi," she told them. "Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full but the Lord has brought me back empty." *Ruth 1:20-21*

Action Plan: To extend your life, start investing yourself in future generations

"He [Obed] will renew your life and sustain you in your old age." *Ruth 4:15*

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"And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work...You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion." *2 Corinthians 9:8, 11*

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"I am God, and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please...what I have said, that will I bring about; what I have planned, that will I do." *Isaiah 46:9-11*

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David O. Dykes  
Pastor, Green Acres Baptist Church  
Tyler, Texas

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For the Joy...  
Pastor David Dykes